

Archbishop blasts Ferndale priest's leading of liberal Mass



Fr. Robert Wurm, a senior priest with the Archdiocese of Detroit, blesses attendees during the liturgy celebrated at the American Catholic Council gathering at Cobo Center in Detroit, Mich., Sunday, June 12, 2011.

To his left is John Hushon of Naples, Florida, Co-chair of the American Catholic Council

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Fr. Robert Wurm, a senior priest with the Archdiocese of Detroit, blesses attendees during the liturgy celebrated at the American Catholic Council gathering at Cobo Center in Detroit, Mich., Sunday, June 12, 2011. To his left is John Hushon of Naples, Florida. / SUSAN TUSA\Detroit Free Press

The top Catholic leader in Michigan slammed a big liberal Mass today in Detroit, saying it had significant abuses and he ordered a review of a Ferndale priest who led the services before 1,500 Catholics, a church spokesman said.

Defying Archbishop of Detroit Allen Vigneron, a Catholic priest from Ferndale led a Mass today in Cobo Center that was organized by the American Catholic Council, a controversial umbrella group of liberal Catholics. And dozens of Catholic priests and deacons from metro Detroit attended the Mass, said organizers.

Rev. Bob Wurm, 78, a retired Catholic priest, presided over the Mass and Eucharistic prayer to some 1,500 assembled inside Cobo Center today. He and others participated

despite a strict order from Archbishop Allen Vigneron for priests and deacons to not take part in today's Mass because it was led by groups considered heretical by the Catholic Church and could violate Church law. Vigneron warned in a letter that clergy could be punished and defrocked for participating in the Mass.

Now, the Archdiocese of Detroit said it will conduct a review of the priest's actions.

"There were several, serious liturgical abuses at that service," said Ned McGrath, spokesman for the Archdiocese. "It's disheartening that a Detroit priest would preside over a service with so many...serious liturgical abuses. There will be — has to be — a careful and thorough review."

Wurm told the Free Press afterwards he was aware that Archbishop Allen Vigneron had explicitly warned all priests and deacons to not participate. But Wurm said he's not worried about being punished.

"I don't see that happening," Wurm said. "I'm older than he (Vigneron) is."

Wurm criticized Vigneron's letter that told clergy to stay away.

"He was making a big mistake," Wurm said.

Catholics at the conference defended their conference and Mass, saying they are in accordance with the laws and values of Catholicism.

"He didn't violate Canon law," John Hushon, of Florida, a lead organizer of the conference, said. "We went right down the straight and narrow."

The Mass was part of a weekend conference that's drawn some 2,000 liberal Catholics from around the world who are upset at the rightward turn of the Catholic Church. They want lay people to have more say in church decision making. Many also want discussion about women, gay, and married priests, and greater accountability on the issue of child abuse by priests. The conference came on the 35th anniversary of a conference in Detroit led by the late Cardinal John Dearden, former Archbishop of Detroit, a leader seen as progressive by liberal Catholics. To them, he represented the spirit of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, which they say recent leadership has abandoned.

"Too many Catholics feel there is no hope," co-organizer Janet Hauter said during the Mass to the crowd.

Members of the crowd at the Mass all wore stoles, usually only worn by clergy, to symbolize equality and the idea that all Catholics, not just its leaders, represent the Church. On the red stoles, there was a drawing of a dove with the words:

"Come Holy Spirit. Fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of your love."



A Mass was held on Sunday, June 12 in Cobo Center that was organized by the American Catholic Council, a controversial umbrella group of liberal Catholics. And dozens of Catholic priests and deacons from metro Detroit attended the Mass, said organizers. Attendees are putting on stoles at the beginning of the liturgy.

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The liberal conference also adopted day a 10-point of bill of rights and responsibilities that calls for more democratization. Discussions continue tonight and Monday. Participants said this weekend's conference energized them to go back to individual parishes to fight for change.

"I'm disturbed by what's taking place," said Robert Livingston, 72, of Berkley. "The Church is going backwards. It's more feudal, more authoritative."

But church officials say that the liberal conference featured speakers who have teachings that violate Catholic doctrine.

A conservative conference endorsed by the Archdiocese, Call To Holiness, was held over the weekend in Livonia and put more of an emphasis on social issues. They said their conference was legitimate, unlike the liberal one, because it was endorsed by the Archbishop and was loyal to Rome.

Speakers at the conservative conference railed against abortion, contraception, yoga and the gay rights movement.

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